



Anthony Shapland, *Sleeper*, 2026, film

lems that Ericsson had with starlings' mimicry of its ringtones; the pairings suggests behavioural affinities between human and nonhuman worlds. Such connections are slightly undone, however, in *Sleeper*.

Before walking around the cluster of easels to view the free-standing large-scale film, you spot two images pinned to them. One easel bears a colour postcard of a Sylvia Sleigh male nude, *Double Image: Paul Rosano*, 1974; another, a same-sized copy of the image painted in grisaille, a traditional painting technique. Initially puzzling, they turn out to be clues to *Sleeper*. In the film, an unclothed male model, whose physique and contrapposto pose recalls that of Rosano, stands as still as a statue in a room replete with easels, art materials and utensils. He could be playing dead apart from his mid-distant stare and the side-angled view of his heaving stomach. Sleigh's male nudes, for which she was denigrated in the 1970s, often display traditionally feminine characteristics – wavy hair and curvaceous, albeit hirsute, bodies – as they gaze tenderly at their female portrayer. In a contemporary climate in which the politics of depicting the nude seem somewhat passé, Shapland recuperates Sleigh's feminist-informed politics of representing the male body as subject for a queer gaze that includes wonder at the alien nature of nonhuman agency.

Unruffled by an incursion of starlings that creates havoc around him, the model's stoic demeanour prompts a querying of the supposed neutrality of the observing gaze. The montage decomposes his body, the lens stares at a taut hand suspended next to a thigh, at a rounded buttock in mid-shot, a face in profile. This is a tender, perhaps erotic, act of looking and recomposing, which the starlings' flitting about continually recalibrates, its measure coming to lie somewhere between threat and charm. Unlike a Russian doll where the inside is a smaller replica of the outside, the parameters between inside and outside shapeshift in 'murmur'. Boundaries are unsettled, misfitting becomes productive.

Anthony Shapland's *murmur* is at Tý Pawb, Wrexham to 31 October.

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Report

Remembering Mike Nelson's Triple Bluff Canyon

In 2004, Mike Nelson created *Triple Bluff Canyon*, a building-wide installation for Modern Art Oxford (Interview AM278). This year, its 60th anniversary, the museum offered him carte blanche to produce a second show. He told me in August that he had considered two options: he could make new work, or he could revisit 'the ghost of my former self and the work that I'd made there'. It was an idea he had toyed with before. In 2000, Nelson's initial proposal for his second show at Matt's Gallery was to precisely remake his 1996 exhibition *Trading Station Alpha CMA* – his first at Matt's, which was reviewed in this magazine at the time (AM194). He 'imagined having exactly the same photograph of the same show with a completely different review because the meaning was completely different' several years later. (In the end, he produced a new work: *Coral Reef*, a 15-room installation that was remade at Tate Britain in 2010.) The new MAO exhibition, *Double Negative (The Clown)*, is a nuanced version of this ambition: a remake of *Triple Bluff Canyon* as if it had been left in situ for the past 22 years, subject to the vagaries of time, entropy and human interference.

Much of Nelson's work is temporally unstable by design. On entering one of his dimly lit, often cluttered and disorienting installations, it can be hard to tell whether the dust is freshly settled or a relic of another age. I remember accessing *Triple Bluff Canyon* in 2004 via a small octagonal vestibule, then choosing one of three doors to keep going, snooping around the cluttered lair that seemed to reflect the obsessive personality of its owner, and following a narrow tunnel into an awkward and dilapidated wooden structure, visible from the other end of the gallery across an expanse of yellow sand. Here and there amid the installation were discarded oil barrels. My impression now, as I recollect the experience, is that it somehow foreshadowed the work's reappearance decades later. I'm not saying that possibility occurred to me at the time but, if I think back to the moment I gazed across the sand at the ramshackle structure, I want to believe that I imagined such a thing could happen.

A memorable photograph of *Triple Bluff Canyon* taken in 2004 in MAO's large upper gallery depicts Nelson's reconstruction of Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed*, 1970, sunken in the sand. Smithson created his work on the campus of Ohio's Kent State University by piling 20 truckloads of clumpy soil on an abandoned shed until its central roof beam cracked. He envisioned the structure succumbing to its environment, natural decay and vegetation. Shortly after the work was completed, President Richard Nixon sent the National Guard to the university campus to disperse students protesting against the expansion of the Vietnam War into Cambodia. They fired into the crowd, killing four

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Mike Nelson, *Triple Bluff Canyon*, 2004, installation view, Modern Art Oxford

and wounding nine. Smithson's work became something he had never imagined it to be: a symbol of protest and a memorial of a massacre.

Nelson partially buried his version of the structure in drifts of yellow sand. Its internal and external dimensions were at odds with one another, making it a claustrophobic and schizoid space, disconnected from itself and its predecessor. Nelson is clear that his shed 'is always a set, and so it's static. [...] It is not a work of Smithson at all. It's a depiction of it, a reference to it.' In 2004, Nelson set his shed 'in the desert during the Iraq War'. Now, 'with the war with Iran', he says, 'it seemed a pertinent thing to revisit'.

In 1967, a few years before burying his woodshed, Smithson returned to his hometown of Passaic, New Jersey, for a pilgrimage he chronicled in the essay 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic'. Among the places he described was a building site for a new highway, which he experienced as a 'zero panorama' containing 'ruins in reverse', or 'all the new constructions that would eventually be built'. He saw roads and bridges rising and falling where there were none yet, edifices reaching up and collapsing into ruin amid the rubble and equipment. Nelson's work occupies a similarly speculative register. 'Art gives you a kind of vision beyond sometimes', he says. 'It's like a glitch in reality... a portal. It's an excitement about what things can potentially mean or be. A kind of freeing from the present banalities of everyday life.' The faculty of the imagination is key to this kind of freedom, but imagination is often a contested site. For Nelson, 'one of the most important things about being human is the battle of the imagination, because if certain forces win that battle, things shift into horrific spheres, such as the battlefield or war. Whereas if social good wins the imagination, then perhaps things don't. In a way, it makes me feel slightly reassured about being an artist, that there is some reason for it. The imagination is important, it's about what it is to be human.'

Imagining *Triple Bluff Canyon* 22 years later, I wonder how the sand has moved, how its materials have aged, who might have set up camp or passed through it, and what traces they left behind. Envisioning a world in which the exhibition was not deinstalled at the end of its run leads me to wonder how the entities connected to it might have fared over the years: the museum, the city, country, world. We usually think of artworks as being located 'in' the spaces, museums or contexts where they are shown, but what if we turned that relationship inside out and thought of the institutions as artefacts of the artwork itself: what alternative histories might we imagine, and how might they help us envision different futures? Contrary to what I know

happened, in my imagination perhaps the museum became an amusement park, or its creative experiments were indulgently funded by local residents, or the shed became a temporary home for nomads heading north. There are no limits to how far the spell cast by the work can reach, only to our willingness to imagine what might have been.

In our grounded reality, however, one of the inescapable banalities of life is ageing and the ultimate horizon of death; realities that come into sharp relief when revisiting an ambitious project after a long period of time. For Nelson, 'rebuilding shows is a little like digging up, exhuming the experience'. It's about 'constantly trying to retrace somebody, and that somebody was you, but you're not quite sure it was you'. Some things come back as muscle memory, in what Nelson says can feel like 'strange hallucinogenic moments'. Other aspects require forensic study of documentation and reckoning with what has been forgotten. 'Then', Nelson says, 'there's the weight of things I used to move around by myself, that now I can't. And that's really odd. There's a sense of failing, of getting old. Maybe the idea of self-portrait as a ruin is quite apt. We all end up like that at some point.'

Nelson's 2026 commission marks a turning point in the history of MAO, not just its 60th anniversary, but also a transition from a programming policy focused on historical monographic exhibitions towards one of commissioning contemporary artists and prioritising community engagement. When I looked up reviews of *Triple Bluff Canyon* published in 2004, some mentioned the war in Iraq, but all were devoid of allusions to identity politics, reactionary culture wars and climate change – major themes today. Even though those issues all had relevance and precedents at the time, they were not addressed by the press, which in those reviews, as I read them now, comes across as disconnected from its imaginative and speculative powers. Maybe it is only with the reappearance of Nelson's work that we can appreciate the imaginative play and freedom it always invited – that we can own that freedom and exercise it widely. What happens when you look back at the same time as imagining your way forward: do you bump into things, knock things over and hurt yourself, or can you envision a new, albeit potentially disorienting, reality? Perhaps you have a vision of bridges and buildings rising and falling, rising and falling on the horizon.

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On Criticism

'Criticism', as Raymond Williams observed in his 1976 book *Keywords* – the year, incidentally, that *Art Monthly* was founded – 'is a very difficult word ... although its predominant general sense is of fault-finding, it has an underlying sense of judgement and a very confusing specialised sense.' Williams is right to draw attention to the often contradictory meanings contained within this common but most ambiguous of terms.

Many years ago, I attended a dinner for a group of British artists who were soon to exhibit together in the US, and there I was introduced to those present as the 'critic' who would be writing the show's accompanying catalogue essay. As soon as the C-word was pronounced, one of the artists exclaimed: 'Oh, it's the enemy!' What struck me as strange about this response was that I was involved in the exhibition in a supportive capacity. I wasn't going to attack the works being shown, even if some of them were not to my personal taste. A catalogue essay